

CLOSING THE *Escape Gap*

WHAT WOMEN'S ESCAPISM REALLY LOOKS LIKE

By Sarah Warewinter

ESCAPISM *isn't* EQUAL

91%
OF PEOPLE FEEL
THE URGE TO
ESCAPE AT LEAST
OCCASIONALLY

In Truth Central's 2025 global study *The Truth About Escapism*, we learned that escapism is not frivolous; it's a fundamental human need. But as we look toward International Women's Day 2026, a crucial question bubbled up that sent us diving back into the data:

*If we all need to escape, do we all get to escape equally?
The short (and depressing) answer? No.*

The data paints a picture of a deep gender divide. The reasons for wanting to escape, the activities chosen, and, crucially, the barriers to enjoyment are strikingly different for women.

If you were to guess the stereotypes that appear in a report about gender and escapism, annoyingly, you'd probably get most of them right. But we're not here to reinforce old tropes. We're here to collaborate on unpicking them. As marketers operating in the spaces people are using to escape, and the brands they are escaping with, we are perfectly positioned to help dismantle these walls and make escapism accessible for everyone.

Part One.

WHAT ARE *women* ESCAPING FROM?

Looking at the global data that sits behind The Truth About Escapism, we can see that the drive to escape is even higher for women; globally 92% of women agree that 'everyone needs to escape at least occasionally' and here in the UK that figure climbs to 95%.

Escape, by its very nature, implies that there's a pressure you want to escape from. And let's face it, there's no shortage of pressures in today's world.

At the top level those look similar:

1.
**MY OWN
MIND**

2.
**THE CURRENT
STATE OF THE
WORLD**

3.
**WHERE THE
WORLD IS
HEADING**

It's a slightly different picture if you cut that data to look men and women separately. While the top spot for men is the state of the world, for women that pressure is internal.

Escaping 'my own mind' was the top pressure for 38% of women compared to 26% of men.

The primary driver of escape for women is internal, and sadly, that's the hardest thing to escape from.

External pressures move down a place with 'escaping the state of the world today' in a close second position.

Seen in the context of news from around the world, where changes are disproportionately affecting women, the phrase 'state of the world' feels like it is doing some heavy lifting. Overall, the world is becoming a scarier place for women, with key setbacks to equality in recent years taking their toll, including...

**THE "LONG COVID"
OF EQUALITY**

Research from UN Women shows that the pandemic set equality back by about 25 years.

**RIGHTS UNDER
THREAT**

Rising global backlash and major setbacks against women's rights, spanning politics, health, justice and economics.

**ONLINE
TOXICITY**

An increase in misogynistic discourse and concerns around AI producing harmful content including sexualised deepfakes.

SO, WHAT ARE THE *biggest differences* IN WHAT *genders* **HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT?**

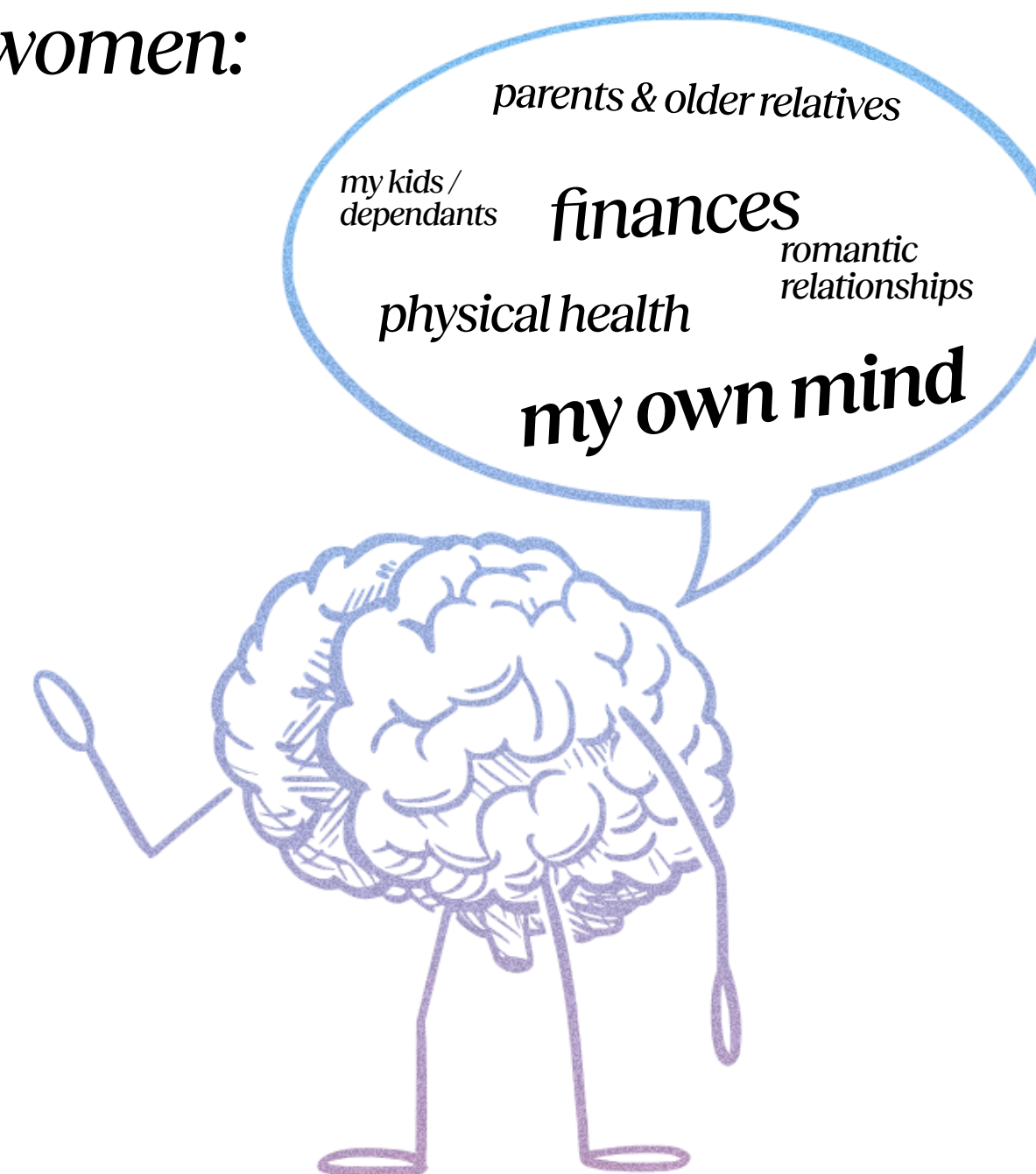
This means that 'the world' isn't just something to escape from. It's an unsafe place to escape to. So, women across the world are often choosing to focus on things that are closer to home, or in the private sphere.

*“My home is my sanctuary, because the world feels like a scarier place”
(75% women vs 70% men).*

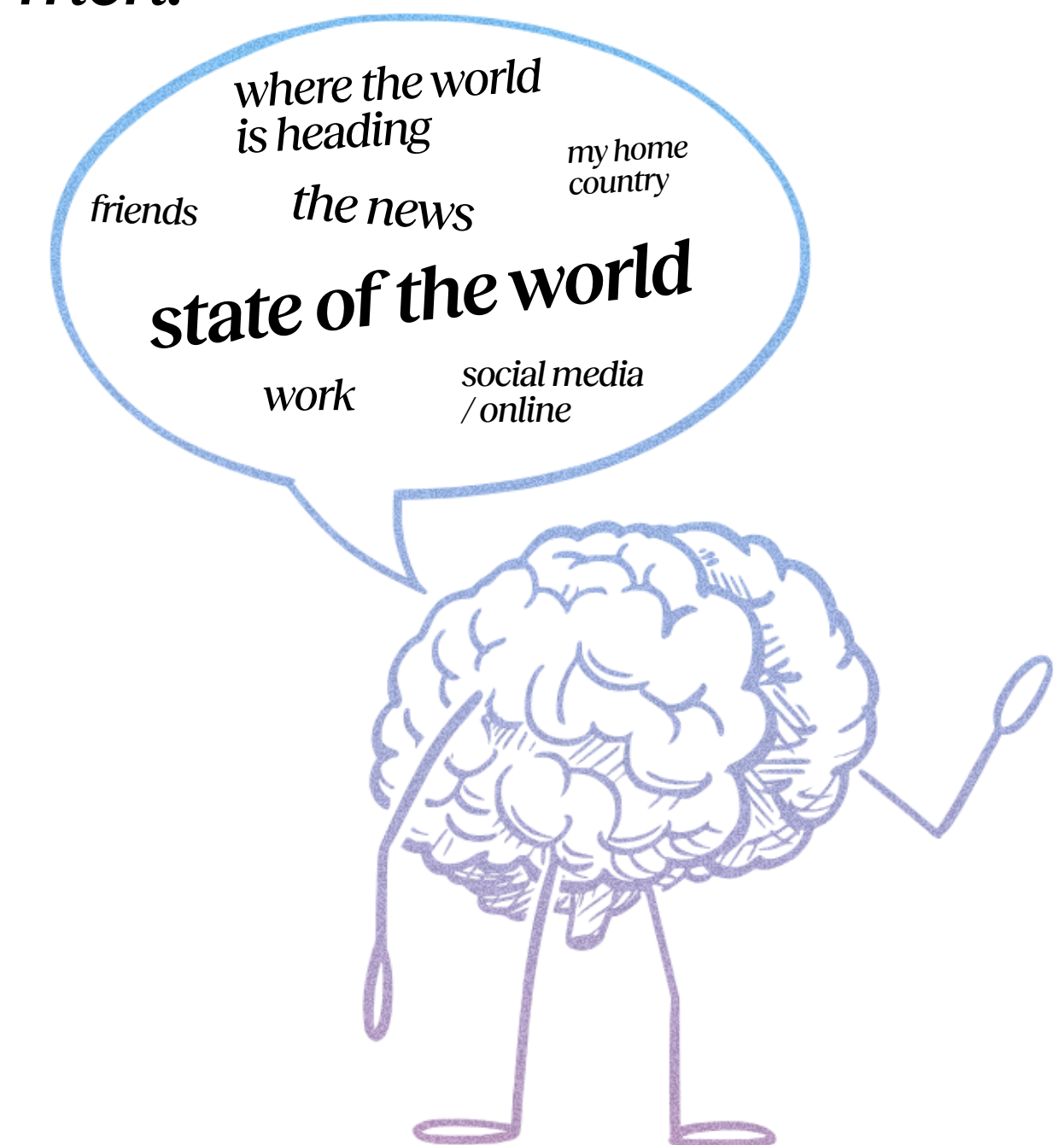
But even the home is complicated. The devil is in the details, and when you look at the areas in the report that overindex for women compared to men, there's a clear pattern of gender imbalance that spotlights domestic pressures – health, caregiving responsibilities, relationships, and finances – as things women feel a need to escape far more than men.

While more women do view their home as a sanctuary it's also the site of the “second shift”, including unpaid labour, caregiving, and the mental load.

women:



men:



When you consider the topics that men and women tend to worry about more, you can see a clear split; *women* are more likely to worry more about *themselves, and domestic relationships*, *men* are more likely to worry more about the *news and global issues outside the home*.

Part One.

TRUTH

The pressures women want to escape from feel *unrelenting*; the world, the home and *their own minds*. In this context, escapism isn't a luxury, *it's a lifeline*.

WHAT CAN WE DO

Design for the *invisible pressures* as much as the visible ones. Women's escape isn't just from places - it's from *expectations, labour, and mental load*. We all need to *challenge stereotypes*, listen harder, and remove assumptions about what women need a break from.

Part Two.

IF WE ESCAPE FROM different pressures, DO WE ALSO ESCAPE IN different ways?

As part of the deep-dive into the data, we wanted to see whether that same gender split was reflected in not just what people were choosing to escape from, but how they were spending that time.

The difference was startling. Women gravitate to forms of escapism that are flexible, low-effort, and able to coexist with the mental load. Escapism becomes about fitting relaxation into the cracks of a busy day.

Top activities for women include...



28%

would choose to keep TV above all other entertainment
(vs 16% of men)



33%

consider themselves crafters
(vs 12% of men)



43%

scroll for hours on their phone
(vs 38% of men)



45%

are very into beauty / skincare
(vs 18% of men)



48%

describe themselves as thrifters
(vs 32% of men)



60%

identify as bookworms
(vs 45% of men)

What connects these?

They are often solo, can be completed in the home, and are interruptible. You can stop scrolling, put down a book, or pause your knitting without ruining the activity.

This is in Contrast to male-skewed forms of escapism, which often require dedicated time, equipment, a need to leave the house, and once begun, must be seen through to the end.

Top activities for men include...



67%
sports fans
(vs 29% of women)



39%
gaming
(vs 19% of women)



51%
diy
(vs 39% of women)



32%
cycling
(vs 15% of women)



26%
running
(vs 14% of women)

This reflects a broader truth: the National Centre for Social Research and ONS found that women simply have less leisure time (38 hours per week vs 43 for men in the UK).

Women spend an average of 3 hours and 37 minutes per day on unpaid labour – 54 minutes more than men. And for cohabiting women, it increases further: one study from the University of Michigan found that husbands create an additional seven hours of housework per week.

When time is limited and interrupted, micro-dosing on escapism has become the norm. Women aren't necessarily choosing a favourite form of escape. Instead, they are pragmatically picking something that will fit into the reality of their day.

Part Two.

TRUTH

Women are *micro-dosing* on escapism; not because they want shorter escapes, but because it's what fits in their *more limited time*.

WHAT CAN WE DO

Stop designing around the current situation, and instead design around their *unmet desires*. Instead of assuming what women like, brands should uncover what women would *choose for themselves*, given time, space and freedom.

Part Three

HOW ELSE CAN WE EXPLAIN THE *gendered* *lines* WE SEE IN ESCAPISM?

Time isn't the only factor shaping the gender split in escapism. Culture has dictated the 'right' ways to escape, and they fall along gendered lines.

As we saw in part two, women were far more likely to identify with traditionally "feminine-coded" pursuits such as crafting, thrifting and reading, while men gravitated toward activities culturally coded as masculine: sport, gaming, DIY, adventure, and the outdoors.

Importantly, the activities themselves aren't inherently gendered. Anyone can cycle, craft, game or thrift. But what people feel comfortable admitting or claiming as part of their identity is heavily shaped by cultural expectation.

For example, only 7% of women said they watched porn to escape, compared with 30% of men. Yet 60% of women identify as avid readers, and book sales are up year on year, with genres associated with female desire up 3.9% and authors like Rebecca Yarros and Sarah J. Maas topping bestseller lists.

This highlights a crucial point: Women may participate in certain types of escapism, but not consider themselves "the type of person" who does.

Take gaming: a woman may love Stardew Valley, The Sims, or “cosy” games, but not identify as a “gamer” because the image of a gamer is still culturally male: headsets, Call of Duty, late-night sessions.

Industry-wide, gaming audiences are roughly 55-60% male and 40-45% female, far closer than cultural stereotypes imply.

Yet women routinely under-identify with the category because their version of escapism isn't what the culture tells them a “real” gamer looks like.

What's more, encouraging and engaging with the women who are part of that culture can in turn let us tackle deeper inequalities further afield – just look at the work that Xbox, Sky Sports, Football Manager, and McCANN are doing to target female gamers and show them these skills have real-world application in coaching roles.

A similar story can be seen in sports. In the UK, nearly 1.8 million more men participate in sport than women. Yet among children the gap isn't as apparent; 43% of girls are likely to consider themselves “sporty.”

Sport England found the real barrier for adult women wasn't lack of interest but fear of judgement. Understanding that barrier resulted in the brilliant, and impactful, 'This Girl Can' work which has been running since 2015.

Part Three.

TRUTH

Culture has decided what '*belongs*' to women, and as a result participation becomes *self-restricting* - not because of interest, but because of *identity*.

WHAT CAN WE DO

Rewrite the codes, expand the permission. Show women in spaces *they've been culturally kept from*; gaming, sport, adventure. Brands can normalise new behaviours simply by changing who they spotlight and who they speak to.

Part Four.

WHY *holidays* DON'T FEEL EQUAL

We often talk about holidays as the ultimate form of escapism – we all love them, right? But for many women, the reality is often closer to a logistical operation than a dream getaway. Once we move beyond “sun, sea, and sand” or short city breaks, preferences and experiences fall along gendered lines that mirror everything we’ve seen so far about time, mental load, and cultural permission.

47% OF
WOMEN

Seek restorative escapes

- think wellness, calm, simplicity, relaxation; compared to just 28% of men.

42% OF
MEN

Want adventure

- think outdoors, thrills, edurance; compared to just 38% of women.

That doesn't mean women don't want adventure or that men don't want rest; it means the conditions for a good holiday feel different based on what your everyday baseline looks like, and what you feel able to participate in.

Holidays as escapism also fall at what we're calling 'The Planning Paradox'. The more that women carry the planning and organisational load for holidays and trips, the less of an escape it becomes.

A 2024 study by WayAway in the US found that 82% of travel decisions are made by women.

That includes destination research, logistics, documentation, packing, pet care, plant watering, childcare considerations, accessibility, budgets, booking car seats for the rental car, and meal plans – the invisible labour that precedes the break.

Consequently, 52% of women spend more time deciding what to do than doing it (vs. 48% of men). This has a darker side as well. Liz Sharples, a lecturer in travel and tourism at the University of Portsmouth, found that women are especially prone to getting ill just before a holiday, with “44% of women reporting an increase of stress during the build up to holidays vs 31% of men”.

The result?

Even the symbolic value of a holiday diverges: for the majority of men, it's the one form of escapism they would save above any other; for women, TV and film rank higher, not because they are “better”, but because they're friction-free and available now.

Part Four.

TRUTH

A holiday isn't a true escape if women
have to *work twice as hard to get there.*

WHAT CAN WE DO

If women carry the load of planning the escape, brands
must *carry more of it for them.* Simplify decision-making,
reduce admin, incentivise the booker and turn planning
from a burden into *part of the joy.* After all, the *escape*
begins long before departure.

Conclusion

International Women's Day is a reminder that equality isn't just about representation, or celebrating the role models in our lives. It's about us all taking a look at the unconscious ways that gender inequality can impact individual freedoms. Freedom in how you choose to spend your time, how you choose to rest, and how you choose to escape.

Brands in the escapism space have a unique opportunity to remove barriers and build experiences that genuinely serve women, or tackle these barriers head on.

1. Can we be more aware that the reasons why your audience want to escape might be very different – and the answer isn't always 'from a stressful job'?
2. Can we create low-friction processes that reduce the mental load of planning an escape? What could we do, or design, differently?
3. How can we all question the unconscious biases that are happening when we choose who to feature in campaigns or activity. For example, why is the mother in your travel ad still looking after the children, and why is the person featured in your games console ad a man?

Can 2026 be the year that we think about what women need from escapism differently?

LET'S *close the* *gap* **TOGETHER**

If you want to explore what this research means for your brand, your category, or your audiences, we're ready to help.

Get in touch with us to start the conversation.

amy.kiernan@mccann.com

McCANN